The Other Side of the Line

Untold, locally held or hidden stories make fine-scale histories alongside grander narratives selected for the national public record. A fine porcelain bowl may also commemorate an extinct pig-footed bandicoot. Some background on the recent exhibition 'Porcelain for Federation Line'.

Wander round the collection of colonial decorative arts in the National Gallery of Australia and there, from Josiah Spode, Stoke-on-Trent England, is a cup and saucer. Not with "Kanguroo and Tigar" against a Kew Gardens background, nor softly painted and gilded scenes of "In New South Wales" on slip cast porcelain from the Derby Porcelain Works. Find the one derived from a bone china tea service made for Fereday, the Sheriff of Van Dieman's Land, around 1825. Wound around its surface is a transfer-printed and painted motif of 'seaweed' - a delicate green and red lacework. Who chose this marine plant as ingenious symbol of island place? It is sobering to realise, however, that around the time this set was made, uninvited colonists were about to engage in a brutal war with indigenous proprietors over that same place.[1] For both its decorative intrigue and the questions about close history invoked by its material survival, that 175 year-old cup and saucer is a provocative drawcard.

In the past twelve months, I have exhibited a suite of narrative vessel groups, including the series *Porcelain for Federation Line* [2,3]. In 2000, widely promoted celebrations for the centenary of Federation prompted questions about contemporary relevance and historical truth. I wondered what ceramics, objects, images, what fine-gauged stories besides the 'federation fathers' accompanied that time, and of which I was ignorant.

One promise and project of Federation in 1901 was the construction of the so-named Trans-Australian Railway to link the new states, west with east. Dotted along the line are rail sidings still carrying the names of early prime ministers and Labour and Liberal party leaders, until Ooldea on the eastern edge of the Nullarbor is a reminder of a much older cultural mapping.

The line was eventually completed in 1916. I became interested in social histories and ecological changes that revolved around it, and the Nullarbor karst it traversed, when involved in biological and historical research there in the 1980s. From this, and relevant to my ceramic

practice, has emerged an interest in perceptions and representations of land and 'nature', including the role of corporeal memory [4]. *Porcelain for Federation Line* evolved from such threads into 33 ceramic 'stories' that weave their way in place and time around the line of federation fathers. Many of the works in the show grew almost as conversations with people I had crossed paths with on the ground, but at opposite ends of the century.

Daisy Bates, for example, who lived in a tent at Eucla and Ooldea between 1912 and 1935. Bates had a personal and ethnological mission "to smoothe the pillow of a dying race" and to document, to her eyes, disintegrating traditional lives of Aboriginal clans in parts of western and southern Australia. A contemporary reading is that she was more dependent on her "natives" than they on her, because her mission and public identity became almost exclusively bound up with their lives. At times, the generosity of her indigenous companions also physically kept her alive. She has left complex writings of local description and ambivalent perception. I am intrigued by her years spent on the edge of what she called "this hushed immensity".

Others like zoologists Fred Wood Jones (South Australian Museum) and Ellis Troughton (Australian Museum) used the line as a conduit for brief trips into the Nullarbor to collect examples of 'a vanishing fauna' - a reference to the rapid demise of rabbit-sized native mammal species that had been holding out in the WA-SA border regions. Fragments of narrative also came from a dingo trapper, alive and lucid in 1985 when I re-located him, but who in the 1920s had despatched by rail a collection of mammal casualties to the museum in Sydney. The stationmaster at Ooldea around the same time did likewise, and wrote poignant vignettes of local natural history and the changes he witnessed. And Jones and Troughton went back to their respective cities and lobbied for national protection laws. Amongst Wood Jones' taxonomic descriptions are his exquisite pen and ink drawings of skulls, bones and teeth.

The narratives of this exhibition resided both in vessels and titles. Placed in loose lines along wall shelves, singly or in connected groups, bowls and vertical reservoirs formed a rolling topography in deference to the Nullarbor karst and remembered rhythms of moving across it. The 33 titles carried English vernacular, scientific and mixed indigenous names that had become part of the regional idiom over time.

Bowls, in particular, insisted themselves into this series. There was some intuitive equivalence in cradling and turning a bowl through two hands with that of a weathered skull of roo, wombat or dingo lifted from the limestone ground. Especially if thin-walled, slightly off-centre, distorted between palms when soft from the wheel, or with subtle leans of base. I could then move over each with line or glaze, rolling up concave interior to rim as one does travelling through saltbush swale to bluebush ridge, or tracking the calligraphy of suture lines on a skull. Using porcelains and bone china, I was interested in the tactile and visual property of fine, bony hardness (brittleness even), rather than potential translucency.

Glazes were 'peeled back' from the vessel surface, and used as rings, patches, bottom pools and partial inner linings. The palette of glaze and revealed body colour came from reduced and oxidised kiln atmospheres. For the past five years, I have been experimenting with the aesthetic and material possibilities of linear inlays. Most recently this has included seemingly incompatible materials like bone china and porcelains. In this series, I have returned again, with the use of embedded line, to the notion and visual device of the reticulum - the interweaving of separate threads of meaning into a sort of symbolic connective tissue. Hence, gridded lines may allude to crossed paths and layered connections in time and place. Or the rectilinear cartesian grid alluding to western cultural overlays (mine included) on black homelands and indigenous knowledges. On a micro scale, it speaks of fence, both the ubiquitous pastoral stretch and the metres of mesh I once rolled out along pit trap lines. Increasingly, line has taken on a textural dimension whereby whole patches of inlay have been controlled to ridge above the vessel surface (for example, 'Haig reservoir I').

'Bowl for Daisy Bates' is a bowl for ambivalence. I imagined it sitting in the distinctive sands of the Ooldea soak, out the front of Bates' canvas tent. Inlaid on the black patchy outer surface is a loose grid of white bone china - as much enfolding cartesian grid as her hat's fly veil. In the flattened base of the bowl, and filled by a burnt-orange glaze, are barely discernible gridded excavations. At Ooldea, sandhills continuously shift, covering and partially revealing fragments of the indigenous and non-indigenous histories which overlie the ancient clay-bottomed water trap.

In other pieces, there was deliberate mix of the soured with the refined. 'Wood Jones drew teeth', a bowl of creamy Limoges porcelain is encircled by bone china drawings of the molars of a 'vanished' hopping mouse. 'Troughton's despatch', a large sleek-skinned bowl holds in its hollow a diagnostic drawing of the skull of the extinct black-footed bilby once plentiful at Ooldea.

Throughout, the karst plateau perforated by circular blowholes, and known in land-locked sea fogs, southern gales and summer heat mirages, insisted itself into the collective narrative - 'Heard sea through bluebush', 'Low cloud each morning', 'Storm line Jubilee', 'Mulga band', 'Through mallee to Ooldea', "Eucla to Forrest".

My approach to making and exhibiting recent vessel series might lie somewhere between Norris Ioannou's perceived potential for "subjective and/ or spontaneous narratives exploring the links between memory and craft artefacts" and Frances Lindsay's belief in the value of "the juxtaposition of historically different works and different media to articulate histories of Australia that have not been told." [5] In the impulse to intuitively explore particular aesthetic and conceptual crossing points, ceramic form and surface - nuances, rhythms, material possibilities - provides some degree of effability. But I wonder what Bates, Troughton or Jones would say if I handed each their bowl?

Endnotes

1. Reynolds, H. 1987. *The Law of the Land*. Penguin Australia.
2. Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney. November - December 2000.
3. Related exhibitions: *Australian Landscapes* (Rex Irwin Art Dealer, 2000); *Bowled Over* (Fremantle Arts Centre, 2001); *Contemporay Ceramics* (Nick Mitzevich Gallery, Newcastle, 2001).
4. Boscacci, L. 1999. *It's not on any map, true places never are*. Pottery in Australia, 38/3, pp 12-15.
5. Attiwill, S. 2000. *The Flow of Craft Theory*. Artlink, 20 (3), p 35.

Boscacci L, 2001, 'The Other Side of the Line', *Journal of Australian Ceramics*, vol 40, no. 3, pp 8 – 12 (Text only version).